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Living in the World

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LIVING IN THE WORLD

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> There is a little of everything in this world. There are people born to stay and others born to go away. There are some who leave because they have a far away love, or because they like a street, a library. . . in some other part of the world. (Pablo Neruda, *Passions and Impressions*, 1978. p.331)

I am a hybrid of both—a person born to stay and a person born to go away. Travel is an opportunity to experience "a little of everything in this world" — my reason for leaving home and my purpose for returning. Through travel, I learn to respect the variety of human associations and multiple forms of intelligence. Travel has been an inextricable part of my education. It has enriched my teaching and contributed to my personal development. Travel continues to expand my curiosity about other cultures—words, movies, books, music, people. I have taken to heart Lucy Sprague Mitchell's [1991] words for teachers:

> Be geographers . . . experimenters . . . hunt for sources . . . study relationships; explore the environment . . . analyze the culture of which . . . [you] are a part . . . above all, live in the world.

Teaching is a choice of living in the world and travel a metaphor for my dialogue with it.

* * *

Going away has never been incidental or spur-of-the-moment. I have actively sought new perspectives through living and teaching away from home. My life abroad became an unfolding narrative full of the contingent and the contradictory. It has consistently been a source of challenge and renewal, of comedy and error. From the demands of a new language and culture, to conditions that ranged from the uncomfortable to the incomprehensible, travel has been an ongoing preparation for teaching in New York City, and a way of continuously growing.

In my early adult years, reading Ovid, Virgil, and Dante helped determine my sense of geography. They stirred my appetite for journeys and quests, and fortified my desire to analyze the culture of which I was a part. So I left New York periodically to discover what was outside of it, and to enlarge my appreciation of the city. My relationship to home was a kind of love affair defined by arrivals and departures, enriched by feelings of longing and belonging.

Living abroad marks the meaning of home. Being away, one memorizes the details of home. The sense of absence is challenged by the sense of rootedness. This has nothing to do with homesickness. Being away from home is not the same as being cut off from one's place of origin. Foreignness is a test of fortitude and imagination. Living under a state of siege in one country and a gerontocracy in another, I interrogated everything about my cultural identity and came to cherish the privileges of democratic life. I learned this cross-cultural lesson: You never fully appreciate what you have until it is not there.

I am a city dweller with a Bronx birthright. The urban has been in my blood through a line of peddlers who came to New York from Warsaw at the beginning of the twentieth century. It's a tributary that runs through my life — subways, schoolyards, delis, barbershops, the scent of talcum and aftershave, candy stores, streets with names like Bruckner Boulevard, the Grand Concourse, Tremont Avenue.

My Bronx origins have always been a source of fascination for others. Like having small children or a dog, it can lead to conversations and interactions with strangers. In Colombia, my multinational, middle-management students wanted to know why I didn't sound like all the other people from the Bronx who resembled Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*. In China, my graduate students wanted to know if it was true that all the blacks in America carried guns. In the world of the cross-cultural, I learned to take teaching opportunities as they came; to capitalize on moments for understanding, clarity, disagreement, and persuasion. I learned more about my identity as an American through my students' misconceptions and our subsequent discussions than through all the tests, lectures, and textbooks I ingested in my formal education.

Emerson refers to being a teacher as going "to the circumference of things." Living abroad gives me a stage on which to craft an identity as a teacher, and enables me to appreciate the beauty of different cultures: The Chinese do not ask questions because it is a sign of disrespect towards a teacher, and good manners require that a guest leave some food on her plate; the Colombians never arrive anywhere on time because their notion of punctuality is approximate. The unfamiliar has taught me the value of students' and teachers' learning to communicate across culture, language, class, age, gender, and all the other walls that inhibit the development

of intelligence and sensitivity.

If teaching is a discipline of hope, as Herb Kohl says, then I am one of its practitioners. Teaching in foreign places opens a window on the infinitely complex and wondrous things about being a citizen of the world. It feeds hope by thwarting the myopic. It tells us how dependent learning is upon context. This means always asking: Who are the students? What's happening in their lives that can be connected to the subject being taught? How can this class develop their minds and imaginations as well as hone skills?

BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA

I fell in love with Bogotá, where I lived and taught English from the summer of 1978 until December 1981. My relationship with the city began and ended in a neighborhood called La Candelaria, an historic neighborhood that rises precipitously into the green hills leading to the Cordillera Mountains. Like Harlem, its reputation for crime and intrigue is more apocryphal than true. Cabbies try to charge double after sunset. They claim it's because of the "peligro" (danger) and the bad streets. La Candelaria is a neighborhood defined as much by the street names as by the people who inhabit it: Calle de la Pena (street of grief), Calle de Toma de Agua (street for drinking water), Calle de la Paloma (street of doves), and Calle de la Paz (street of peace). During the day, the narrow passageways brim over with actors, teachers, students, writers, bakers, government officials, thieves, and military police. When the sun shimmers on the red tiled roofs after a morning rain, one can see why the Spanish became enamored of this accursed and bewitching city.

What brought me to Colombia was not a love for danger, but for literature. Full of Vallejo and Lorca, I came to South America fresh out of college to discover Latin American writers, to teach, and to translate. I loved language and writing, and this was an opportunity to develop both. In less than a month after securing my first teaching job at one of Bogotá's many language institutes, I was fired. This confirmed that I had my pedagogy right. They wanted me to talk as though I came from Ohio (Fri-dee, Mun-dee) and follow a script of "repeat after me" to overcrowded classes full of accountants, bank managers, and secretaries. What I was not prepared for was the danger and the volatile nature of a country with a

history of civil war.

Bogotá, like Colombia itself, was a city under siege. The M19, a guerrilla insurgency group, was wreaking havoc on the military and the government. Political graffiti were boldly plastered on billboards and streets. One evening, at a politically charged musical concert, police with billy clubs and plastic shields emerged in great numbers from the shadows of the balcony, the back of the theater, and surrounded the audience. We were asked to file out. With the suspension of civil rights (*a toque de queda*), assemblages like this were considered illegal. I learned never to leave home without my ID card and to be prepared for the unexpected: a car bomb, mass demonstrations, tear gas, and military police roaming the streets with MK 47s. What was once the "Athens of Latin America" felt like Rome after the fall. The graft of the military and the government was as thick as the oil Exxon was drilling from the Atlantic coast. I went to teach English and found myself asking why only some of the world was developed and the rest so disparate in its underdevelopment. I experienced the other history of America, the censured history that I had never been formally taught.

Through everyday experiences—waiting in line to pay taxes, navigating the circuitry of Colombian communication—I acquired the patience and understanding needed to teach. I learned about the absolute necessity of suspending judgment and expectations in order to move between cultures. I was a privileged gringo in a developing world metropolis coming to terms with the long legacy of colonialism—military regimes, multinationals, and a thriving drug trade with the United States. Given the violent and exploitative nature of the political and social climate, I was ambivalent about teaching middle-management executives from Exxon and B.F. Goodrich. Most of that was tempered as I came to know my students: charming men (never women), gracious, hard-working, fun-loving, and patriotic to a fault. I learned to shelve my politics, since mastery of English was key to their mobility in the corporate culture. My ambivalence became curiosity, a desire to comprehend multinational corporate culture. I wanted to know what it was like to work for Americans, how business was conducted, and how communication proceeded. My curiosity became the basis of our classes.

In Bogotá, I abandoned the official textbooks that were both insulting and

inaccurate. They featured television sitcom-style stories employing humor based on caricatures rather than accurate depictions of how people communicate in real social settings. Structured like basal readers, the texts were full of fill-in-the-blank and multiple-choice exercises. The managers needed situational uses of language that would serve them well professionally. I assembled articles, photographs, postcards, posters, and advertisements to create an array of language-rich resources. I learned to fine-tune my own listening skills (since I was both a teacher and a learner of a second language), in order to judge when to correct my students. The work with multinational corporate managers, tire executives, and bank administrators was to talk oil, rubber, finances, and all the other things that were important to them, including their identities as Colombians and Bogotanos. I was always looking to find a way for life and learning to converge.

Later, in my first academic position teaching American literature at La Universidad de La Salle, I was expected to deliver lectures from an elevated wooden podium. I arrived at this conservative Jesuit college having recently discovered the work of Paolo Freire and Ira Shor. I was enamored with liberatory pedagogy. I had grandiose plans for my students to assume responsibility for their learning, grade themselves, assess their peers, work in teams, pose active questions, and freely discuss their interpretations of everyone from Mark Twain to Joan Didion. My misguided intentions were met with a pre-Marconian silence and an air of discomfort. I had violated the students' more traditional expectations of the teacher. They wanted lectures, book reports, and tests. They did not wish to take risks or to be subject to someone who would challenge the authority of the conventional classroom. They wanted to know how many quizzes they would have during the term and on what their final grade would be based. It was a sobering experience that taught me the hubris of radical pedagogy.

GUANGZHOU, CHINA

A guide in an old white van met us at the airport. Some hours later, my family and I arrived at a college where we spent the night before departing for Guangzhou. It was August 1988. The heat was as insufferable as Canal Street can be on a July afternoon in New York, only worse because it was 9:00 p.m. Thousands of cots

lined the entrances to cinder block apartment buildings draped with wash. People slept outside everywhere. At the university, they served us scrambled eggs over white rice, warm beer, and coca cola. The feeling of the surreal was as palpable as the subtropical heat. Both the exotic and the unfamiliar characterized life in China: snake blood in the market, spittoons outside of each classroom. What had brought me there was a desire to examine the socialist life from the inside—again, the drive to explore and expand my boundaries. But what stands out was the students' depth of humanity in the face of repression, and how the teaching of English was politicized in the charged atmosphere of change.

I was a foreign expert at Sun Yat Sen University. We lived in a Russian-built apartment complex, The Foreign Guesthouse, with other teachers and students from abroad. Visitors had to sign in at the front desk. We were told this was a security precaution. The log was sent to the local authorities. The Chinese are not xenophobic; they just like keeping foreigners together in one place. Our accommodations, compared to those of the Chinese faculty, were luxurious—two bedrooms, an electrically heated shower, a color television, an air conditioner, a refrigerator, gas burners, and mosquito nets. We were given two large thermoses to fill with hot water from a spigot four flights down. On Sundays, we were driven in a white van to a supermarket for foreigners. People from the Foreign Affairs office were our guides, liaisons, supervisors, and big brothers. Unidentified "monitors" were placed in every class to ensure that our needs were met and that we followed the textbooks. The Chinese paid us, accommodated us and, like consummate hosts, entertained us.

My students were medical doctors, molecular and genetic biologists, immunologists, neurophysicists, and chemical and biological engineers. All were under thirty and knew the ancient history of their town or city as we might know the batting stats of Mike Piazza. They were part of a World Bank scholars program, which sent China's brightest abroad to pursue graduate and post-graduate work. They were fluent in English and could speak about their specialization with confidence. They were at Sun Yet Sen to refine their language skills before departing in the fall for the United States. Their eagerness to learn was unlike any I had ever experienced. To teach them was a privilege because of their unadulterated desire

to communicate proficiently in a second language, and to comprehend the culture that they were about to encounter. Unlike their parents, who had spent time in labor camps because of the Cultural Revolution's campaign to "reeducate" Western-influenced intellectuals, they belonged to the generation of "the opening door." For them, the future was something more than Mao jackets and the Chairman's quotations. The idea of the democratic was neither satanic nor imperial. They felt it was their civic obligation to give back by venturing abroad.

I never used the podium to address my students. Instead I sat on desks, moved around, and tried to put them at ease through the universal currency of humor. Put people at ease and they are more willing to learn and more capable of doing so. This was in stark contrast to the sternness and expert pose of Chinese university professors who discouraged questions or free-flowing conversation. There is a fine line between being friendly and being a friend. I was careful not to blur the two. I took great liberties with the textbook by inserting contemporary content. I introduced free writing at the outset of every class by playing American folk music and jazz. They heard more Charley Parker and Phil Ochs than did most Americans their age. I used music as a device for inspiring imagination, expanding language, and examining American culture.

When teaching in extreme times, nothing stays the same. There is no business as usual since there is nothing usual about the threat of terror and violence. In China, as an English teacher, I experienced the Orwellian drama of civil upheaval. Along with students from all over the country, teachers, artists, and workers gathered for close to three weeks to publicly denounce political corruption and assert the need for human rights. A Statue of Liberty was constructed in the middle of the square as an emblem of the struggle, and students marched peacefully and patriotically through the streets. In Guangzhou, I was witness to an historic moment generated by the young, and I wanted to find a way to allow this event to enter the life of our classroom. I put down the textbook and never returned to it.

When the army is rumored to be encircling the city where you live, preparing to storm the gates of the University, and your daughter is worried about what to do if this happens when she is at school, the teaching of English takes on another dimension. As a teacher, I was challenged by the urgency of events. All

the Freire, Horton, and Goodman I had read told me that this was a moment for which my practice had been a preparation. I organized my classes to allow life to define what we would think, write, read, and communicate about. We watched Chaplin's *Modern Times*, the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine*, and Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* as imaginative frameworks, metaphors for the issues that were so politically charged. The students talked and wrote and read each other's writings.

The massacre at Tiannanmnen Square cast a shadow over my experience in China. On the night of June 2, nearly 10,000 students, including mine, left the University fearing for their safety. Only the foreign teachers and a small contingency of foreign students stayed behind. Never again was I to feel the sense of respect I was accorded during those torridly hot and damply cold days in Guangzhou. Being a teacher mattered, and for a moment I felt that I had lived the ancient Chinese epigram: "First the emperor and then the teachers." It was my privilege to enter an historic moment and share a pedagogical space with students who were able to communicate through a second language their exhilaration and pride at changing the world. I never did get a chance to say goodbye to them. After the tanks rolled in, most left and never returned. Some departures are meant to be that way—final and covered with clouds.

* * *

In an essay, "The Poet Is Not a Rolling Stone," in his book, *Passions and Impressions,* the poet Pable Neruda writes:

> The poet has two sacred obligations: to leave and to return. The poet who leaves and doesn't return becomes a cosmopolite. As for the other, the first phase of his life must be devoted to absorbing the essences of his native land [place] and later must return them. He must restore and repay them. His poetry and his actions must contribute to the growth and maturity of. . . people. (p. 331)

Every time I have left New York, I have returned replenished and eager to teach. With each sojourn abroad, I have learned more about who I am and what it means to live mindfully and wide-awake. I have learned as much from the places I have been as from the students I have taught. The cross-cultural life is circular and reciprocal, composed of relationships forged between people and places. Much

of my knowledge and all of my theory is situated in these relationships and in my personal attempt to go to the circumference of things. What else do we bring to the children in our classrooms but our biographies, either full or empty, of what we have seen and recorded, the evidence of our having lived in the world.

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